

Beijing

updated 4:29 a.m. EDT, Tue May 20, 2008

Marathon runners reach a Great Wall

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- 1,600 runners from 49 nations compete in May 17 race
Marathon, half-marathon, 5K and 10K races were offered to runners
Participants in race generally take 50 percent more time than normal marathon

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By Rebecca Byerly For CNN

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TIANJIN, China (CNN) - Mao Zedong once said, "He who has not climbed the Great Wall is not a true man."



Participants in the Great Wall Marathon look over the not-so-typical course to run on May 17.

Mao likely never anticipated the scene on May 17, when more than 1,600 athletes from 49 countries not only climbed but ran The Great Wall of China Marathon. The race was held for a ninth year in Tianjin, a rural province three hours outside Beijing.

"For most people just seeing the Great Wall of China is a big deal," explained Cliff Jennings, an agent for Marathon Tours, a Boston-based adventure-running company. "But, for a few hours one day a year, people can actually run over 2,000 years of history on a portion of the Great Wall."

Revered as one of the most challenging marathons in the world, runners clambered over thousands of steps, varying in length and size, to complete the course.

In addition to the marathon, participants also had the option to run a half marathon, 10K, or 5K. Far from the pollution in Beijing over which the Olympic marathon runners are fretting, these runners enjoyed a mild smog-free day.

The event's diverse participants span the globe and represent generations, with ages ranging from 14 to 85. Margaret Hagerty, who at 85 competed in the 10K race, now holds the record for the oldest woman to ever run the wall.

Hagerty is already a 2007 Guinness Book World Record holder for the oldest woman to run a marathon on seven continents, including Antarctica.

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"I've run over 80 marathons across the world but climbing all those steps for the 10K race on the Great Wall was the hardest thing I have ever done," Hagerty, a North Carolina native, admitted. She began her running career at 64 after she went to a clinic to quit smoking. "The Doctor told me to stop smoking and start moving," Hagerty said. When asked why she chose to run the Great Wall she replied, "Why not?"

Despite the difficulty of the course, runners such as Terry Theobald, who did not finish the 2007 marathon in the eight-hour time requirement necessary to get official credit for the run, managed to complete the challenge this year.

"There were so many times I wanted to quit along the way, but I was determined to not let the wall get the best of me this year," Theobald, 41, who lives in New York said. "When I crossed the finish line with a time of seven hours and fifty two minutes with just eight minutes to spare, I was thrilled." Theobald had a tattoo of the Great Wall Marathon designed on her back as a reminder of her desire to complete this year's marathon.

The Great Wall marathon typically takes runners 50 percent longer to complete than their average marathon. This year Romualdo Sanchez Garita, a 37-year-old runner from Mexico, set a new marathon record of 3 hours, 18 minutes, 48 seconds.

The event highlighted the diversity of the runners and the richness of Chinese culture. In addition to the Great Wall, the course also took competitors through traditional Chinese villages.

"This is more than just a running event, it is also an exchange of culture," said Thomas Orr, a South African who has been working in Beijing the past three years and ran the marathon last year. "The highlight of the year for the people in these villages is seeing hundreds of runners from around the world come through their towns. It is also a great opportunity for runners to see another part of China."

Each year the number of runners who take part in the event increases, but this year participation in the marathon saw unprecedented growth.

"The number of participants in this year's race increased by 50 percent," announced Lars Fyhr, the International Sales and Event Manager for Albatros Travel, the tour agency that organized the race. "We think the sharp increase could partially be due to people having more interest in China this year because of the Olympics in Beijing."

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runners said they feel they have already taking part in this year's Games.

"Though I will not be here when the Olympics conclude with the marathon event," an unidentified runner joked as he finished the final section of the wall, "I can say that I was already there, and my marathon in China was on the Great Wall." [E-mail to a friend](#) [Mixx it](#) | [Share](#)

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